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ABSTRACT

With fiber optic networks that can deliver library materials directly to the user from computerized data banks, is there any need for the library function? For the short term, public libraries will survive. The answer for the medium and long-term is much less certain. Libraries will survive if librarians see themselves as active providers of information and services that the public needs to function effectively in a society changed by the communications revolution. Public libraries must continue to exist because they are central to maintaining the tradition of providing the free access to information necessary to have an informed public. Librarians will have to campaign to preserve free access to government information, as private data services may preempt the libraries' traditional role as information suppliers. Cable companies may be able to bar distribution by libraries and other nonprofit organizations from their two-way, interactive videotex systems, and thus become the gatekeepers of information. To preserve their relevance to the community, libraries should become production centers for educational, governmental, and public access channels on local cable television systems, programming some of the channels themselves. (Author/LMM)

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WILL THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES KILL THE PUBLIC LIBRARY?

Keynote speech by John Wicklein at "Information and Technology: At the Crossroads," a conference of the Library and Information Technology Association of the American Library Association, Sept. 20, 1983 in Baltimore, Md.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

In the age of communications, will the public library survive? Or will it be killed by technology? With fiber optic networks that can deliver library materials directly to the user from computerized data banks, is there any need for the library function?

The questions are not idle. They are being asked, with some anticipation--not to say lip-licking anticipation--by commercial suppliers of information, who smell blood. And they are being asked with some trepidation by librarians themselves, now that they hear the wolves at their door.

The answer for the short haul is Yes, of course public libraries are going to survive--maybe with reduced budgets, but they are going to survive. The new technologies are not going to replace books that people want to read; not immediately, at any rate. The answer for the medium and long term is much less certain.

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Especially in the competition to provide reference information from books and other sources, public libraries are being threatened by commercial suppliers using electronic delivery systems to provide data to businesses and the home.

Faced with that reality, I think you can say that, No, public libraries will not survive, if librarians think of them primarily as repositories of printed books waiting passively on shelves for people to discover them and check them out. The longterm answer is Yes, if librarians think of themselves as active providers of information and services that the public needs to function effectively in a society changed by the communications revolution.

Although the transition from books on shelves to books stored in computers will be gradual, it has surely begun, and public libraries must now take that into account.

Given this change in the means of disseminating information, and given the fact that many private companies have come into the fiel to help bring it about, perhaps the more germane question is: Should the public library survive? Or will the public be served equally well by a marketplace system that gives people the information they are willing to pay for?

Here I have an unequivocal answer:

It is essential that public libraries continue to exist, because they are central to maintaining the tradition of providing the free information necessary to keep the grassroots public informed.

This is basically a First Amendment issue; it goes to a fundamental of information policy in the United States:

To promote the general welfare, the Constitution and Congress have encouraged free access to a wide diversity of information. The Supreme Court has ruled that the right to know is an essential corollary of the First Amendment. A political democracy cannot function if its voters do not have that right.

It is facile for profit-making information services to say that they will take care of all of the public's information needs because the public will pay for anything they want, if they want it badly enough.

Clearly, some members of society cannot pay for information they need and by right ought to have. For a hundred years, until quite recently, this was a generally accepted truth that conscientious citizens tried to deal with for the good of the whole. In the Nineteenth Century, only the rich could buy books. Faced with the problem of guaranteeing a free exchange of ideas among all citizens--not just those who could afford books--communities solved it creatively. Public tax support for libraries became as much a part of the American tradition as tax support for public schools. Free libraries were set up to diminish the gap between the informed rich and the less-informed poor. By continuing to support libraries in their effort to provide free information--albeit by a different technology--we are being conservative, carrying on a tradition that has worked well for individuals and society.

To have an informed public, access to information cannot be made dependent on ability to pay.

In the struggle to keep information available free of chage, librarians are not fighting political and social conservatives, who in most cases support free public libraries. They are fighting crassly commercial entrepeneurs and their supporters in government who, for their own selfish profit motives, say that every public good must now stand the test of the marketplace. Today, that rules out services to the 9.5 million unemployed and the 30 million living below the poverty level. If you give such a person a choice between buying a book or a loaf of bread, she will obviously buy the loaf of bread. Yet the book--a book on retraining for a new career, for example--may be what she needs to lead her to her next job. That kind of help is what libraries have been supplying to low-income people, and what they must continue to supply, once the book--or other vital information--is available to the public only through electronic retrieval.

This was the position taken at the 1979 White House Conference on Library and Information Services. Delegates representing a wide cross-section of society passed a resolution that states the following:

Whereas, no citizen should be restricted from access to information by the imposition of fees,

Therefore be it resolved, that a National Information Policy be studied and implemented which would:

1. guarantee all citizens equal and full access to publicly funded library and information services...

Two years later, when it became clear that was not to be the policy of the Reagan Administration, the American Library Association passed a resolution urging the President and Congress to continue free public access to federal information. It stated that a democratic government has an obligation to make available to its citizens the results of its actions, including its information-collecting activities and its research and development efforts. The ALA resolved that the underlying principle of U. S. information policy continue to be "free and equal public access to the data collected, compiled produced and published in any format" by the federal government.

This, of course, is not the intention of the present administration. It intends to dismantle government information services and turn them over to private enterprise. This would be disastrous to free access to data, since the government is the largest collector and producer of information useful to the public. As Michael Pollan pointed out in the June 1983 issue of Channels, the administration would have us pay twice for the same information--once with tax dollars to collect it, and then to buy it back from private vendors who would be its only distributors. Not only that, but the private vendors would not have to bother to make available government information that is important, but for which there is not a mass market demand on which they could turn a sizeable profit. The public would not be able to get that information at any price.

The issue is so critical that librarians will have to mount a campaign to preserve this public resource for free access. To do that, they will have to develop delivery systems that equal or exceed the capabilities of the commercial information providers.

No, I don't think that is going to be easy. It means fighting to maintain or increase tax support--local, state and federal--and looking for other sources of funding, as well. It will be a hard battle, but the tradition of public support for library services is a long one, and it should not be allowed to succumb to an attack by the marketeers.

Assuming the library has a role to play in preserving public access to information, does it <u>have</u> to continue to survive as a physical entity? By the end of this century, when most library materials, including books, can be delivered to home and business over fiber optic wires, can't we dispense with the library as a <u>place</u> where people come looking for information? Won't the system work just as well if the "library", in effect, is strictly a computer center, staffed with technicians, from which people at home can access information supplied by a multitude of public and private suppliers?

That idea, promoted by both commercial operators and the gee-whiz school of new technologists, overlooks several valuable functions of the public library and librarians that have evolved over the last hundred years.

The library is not a self-replenishing storehouse of books that automatically indexes each acquisition in a card catalogue. It is an institution guided by a trained intelligence that serves as editor and consultant for the public, concerning the information it needs.

Publishing of books and periodicals and compilation of data banks have exploded to the point where presentation to the public of everything that is offered becomes absurd, if not impossible. The librarian exercises critical judgment in selecting what can and should be presented, and organizing it so it can be logically and easily accessible to people who ask for it. While this puts a heavy responsibility on a librarian not to act as censor or political or social gatekeeper, it is a necessary function that we in the general public must for the most part delegate, if we are to make sense out of the vast amount of material available to us. We need the librarian as an informed guide to the material. A computer can't give us that.

For the indefinite future, to make efficient use of this material, we must go physically to the library to discuss it with the librarian and get advice-and even instruction--on how to access it. We will have to be physically present to get publications from the shelves, or from microfiche, record players, videotape cassettes, videodisks and sophisticated computers situated in the library itself.

It is possible that the need for a physical plant to provide access to these things will diminish in the future. Interactive cable systems, based on fiber-optic delivery, will provide face-to-face contact with librarians over two-way videotelephones. Videotex systems will permit people at home to access printed texts and videodisks, and interactive cable television will allow subscribers to view videocassettes on demand.

Yet I can think of several good reasons why a library facility, open and welcoming to the public, will still be necessary even when the home communication set is installed as an everyday appliance.

The first I have mentioned earlier, and it will be always with us: the poor will not have access in their homes to sophisticated sets that provide all the options I have described. For that, they will have to come to the library.

Second, in all the reading I have done on the subject, I have yet to see how the serendipity factor will be built into a videotex system that you use at home.

The serendipity factor: That's the phenomenon in which you are sitting in a carrel at the end of a stack and your eye wanders to the shelves, and there you see on old book that says, in gold on an old red binding, "The Private Lives of Madame de Pompadour." I've just never been able to resist pulling the book out and finding out about Madame de Pompadour, right on the spot, even if I have been researching an article on communication satellites for which I have a deadline tomorrow.

By the same token, I am unable to pass by an open shelf in the library that is marked "Librarian's Choice." I may say, afterward, "Boy, that's some choice!", but I look at books I never would have found if I had come into the library and gone straight to the card catalogue and looked up every volume available on communication satellites.

Yet, how do you arrange such chance encounters by way of videotex? Flip subliminal frames on sailboating in front of my eyes while I'm accessing a page on direct broadcast satellites? Or surreptitiously slip in a footnote at the bottom of the DBS frame that says, "Oh, by the way, have you seen that delightful

article on monarch butterflies in this week's New Yorker?"

No, they haven't solved that one for me, yet. Still, I feel that serendipity of this kind is necessary to me as a person if my interests are not going to be limited to a narrow line of sight. I find that serendipity in a library--or, more precisely, quite fortuitously, it finds me.

The third reason for a physical library may not be obvious even to people who appear there regularly to borrow books. It is this: The library is, and should continue to be, a place where people come together to address some basic human needs.

It is a place to come to be quietly entertained--even if the entertainment may be just watching other people browse, and exchanging a word or two with them.

It is the place to come to look at an old black-and-white movie in the company of a group--that is a human value you may not get sitting in front of your color set at home.

It is a place to hear a lecture on pre-Columbian civilizations because you are planning to take a trip next winter to see the Maya ruins in the Yucatan.

It is the place to hear a local official answer questions about a change in property assessments to 100 per cent valuation.

The library exists as a public meeting place of value to the community. Although librarians recognize and promote this function, in most towns the library presents a low profile as such a meeting place. Indeed, it is often performed by a separate facility officially designated as a community center.

I suggest that, if the socially useful library function is to survive in the era of the new technologies, it will have to become even more actively and aggressively the center of the community than it is today.

I think a couple of factors have inhibited it from becoming that, up to now.

One is philosophical. Many librarians are not sure that they should play an activist role in society, and commit their institutions to involvement in community problems. The debate about that is intense.

A second factor is psychological. From the time they are children in school, many people are taught to think of the library as a place where you have to tiptoe around and be quiet. In the early years, you do that because the librarian will get you, if you don't. Later, when you are grown up, you still tiptoe, for fear that any kind of noise will disturb visitors reading in the library. I feel a little guilty, even now, about speaking out loud to a reference librarian to ask where I can find a particular book. An expectation of silence is appropriate in a room that can be isolated for reading and study. But it doesn"t make sense in human terms to inhibit talk in the stacks, or in front of a paperback rack or the magazine browsing area — and some libraries still do that. It is natural for people to want to exchange comments about books, or tell a neighbor about something they have found in the library that interests them.

Creating an atmosphere conducive to conversation would reduce the inhibitions about using the library fully as a community center.

Its value as such a center will be enhanced proportionately as the new technologies of information and communication are installed there for everyone's everyday use.

This leads me to support an idea that preserves the library as a physical institution and adds to its usefulness as a center for people to access information and exchange information.

Just as many forms of communication are coming together through the new electronic technologies, the information functions of society--which include government and education--are coming together to provide better-integrated methods of creating a well-educated public. A library can facilitate that by becoming the community's information and telecommunications facility. In addition to providing meeting rooms for public screening of films and the like, it can provide several other new services:

1. Sophisticated terminals for greater access to videotex reference material than is available to consumers via personal computers, and especially for the use of those who <u>have</u> no personal computers.

2. Video disks and video cassettes, which people can be viewing at the library between now and the time when they will be easily supplied by the home electronic delivery system.

3. Computerized library catalogues for locating the whereabouts of a book or publication, and reserving it if it is not immediately available on the shelves.

But beyond supplying these technologies, the library could mount major service that, until now, most public libraries have not been involved with:

The library could become the headquarters and production facility for the public access and educational functions of the local cable system. A few libraries, in fact, have already done this.

Drawing on its experience of providing other facilities for the public, the library can be an ideal base on which to build a community-access cable television production center. Its information facilities are ready-made to be drawn on by people who want to present local information programs via the access channels.

The library itself could program one channel with news about its activities. In conjunction with the school system and community colleges, it could offer self-help and college-credit courses to people served by the cable system.

More than that, it could build on the library's function as a meeting place by mounting town meetings and public hearings in which residents could participate both in person and by using the response buttons on keypads — in the two-way cable system.

Library board sessions could become more participatory, with input from people using their interactive sets at home, as well as people who come out to the library for the meeting.

To make all this happen, a core group of ~~citizens~~ residents concerned with the development of the library must be found to set up an organizing committee for the Community Communications Center. This group must act decisively to convince ~~residents~~ people in town and the ~~municipal~~ town council that the center should be developed, and based at the library.

Some cable companies--Cablevision in Boston, for example--believe that such access programming increases their ability to sell service to subscribers. Others oppose the idea because they want to use all their channels for profit-making commercial programming and information services. The cable television lobby is trying at this very moment to get through Congress a bill that would give them complete control of every channel. This, obviously, must not be allowed to happen, if we are to have cable systems dedicated to serving the public interest, and not merely the profit interests of the cable operator.

So, the library-support committee may have a battle on its hands to get the channels it needs to make educational and access programming available to people in the community. But the benefits of doing this are so obvious that the effort ought to be pursued.

The library in Atlanta has seen that, and is off and running with a facility and programming schedule based there. For some time now, the Atlanta-Fulton Library has been programming a cable channel ~~designated for its use,~~ 24 hours a day.

Five hours of that consists of so-called "live-on-tape" programs. Staff producers tape discussions by librarians and others of recently acquired books and new services available to the public. They also tape programs and meetings at the library to which the public has been invited. Recently, they covered a meeting held by the NAACP to inform people about their voting rights. And they have presented public hearings on library matters.

The rest of the day, the cable operation cycles printed information about services at its various branches, and its calendar of events.

Atlanta has also installed a video teleconferencing studio that can receive satellite transmissions and, if need be, transmit its own originations to an uplink. Not too long ago, it connected into an ALA video teleconference on cataloguing in which 110 libraries took part, including four in Canada. With the help of Mary Diebler of the Public Service Satellite Consortium, a number of libraries have formed a cable library network to test out the use of satellites in a number of ways.

In Atlanta, the library administration sees this as only a beginning of its involvement with telcommunications. Bob Miller, who is in charge of the cable operation, told me they have now outlined a pilot project to use the cable system's interactive capacity in some of the ways I talked about earlier.

First, they intend to plug into the central computer, so that all the branches can tie in with an on-line circulation system. The system would be available to people at home, using a keypad to access the catalog and put in reservations for books that would then be delivered to their local branches.

The library is planning regular staff meetings in which people at the various branches can engage in two-way discussions with people at the central library.

An ultimate goal is to set up a full-service videotex system that would provide thousands of pages of reference material and community information to residents via the cable system.

Miller told me that a primary purpose of the pilot is to measure the costs of such services, as a basis for plans on how to pay for them. He hopes to begin the test within a year.

Similar drives to become involved in telecommunications are taking place at a number of libraries across the country, and I think that is a good omen for the future.

This conference is about technology; in fact, my talk was billed as a talk on the effect of the new technologies on libraries. And yet I have talked more about changes in the human uses of libraries than I have about the potentials for electronic retrieval of information. That is because I think the technology is forcing us to re-examine our human values.

What is it we seek to achieve by this new access we have to exponentially increasing sources of information?

I don't think it is the re-ordering of our lives to adjust to some technological imperative. I think we want to use information --including that which we get from entertainment--to live more satifying lives.

That is why I do not buy the popular scare notion, based on George Orwell, that we will become an electronically regimented mass of people, sitting in physical isolation in front of our Home Communication Sets, interacting with other isolated computer operators only through keyboard and touch pad.

That notion denies a humanity that we will never allow to be denied. We are, and will continue to be, social beings. For most of us, telepresence isn't good enough. We will persist in coming together, in concrete physical locations, for the getting of knowledge, entertainment and healthy social intercourse.

I hope that one of those locations will be the public library, in its new role as the community gathering place for information and telecommunications.

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John Wicklein, a journalist and educator, is the author of "Electronic Nightmare: The New Communications and Freedom," (Viking Press, New York, 1981; Beacon Press, Boston, revised edition, paperback, 1982) on the benefits and dangers of the new technologies of communication.

Wicklein has served as dean of the School of Public Communication at Boston University, and is now in charge of grants for news and public affairs programs at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Washington, D. C. He has been a reporter and editor on The New York Times and has managed the television news operations of WNET, WCBS and WABC in New York. He is married and has three children.

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